

Chapter 2

Eight Key Changes to the SAT

This chapter describes the major changes in the SAT that make it more focused and useful than ever before. These changes occur starting with the March 2016 administration of the SAT and the October 2015 administration of the PSAT/NMSQT®. The redesigned SAT, which parallels changes in the PSAT/NMSQT and PSAT™ 10 and the new PSAT™ 8/9, will test the few things that research shows have strong connections to college and career readiness and success. The eight key changes are described below.

Relevant Words in Context

Rather than testing you on seldom-used words and phrases in very limited contexts (say, a sentence or two), the redesigned SAT will test your understanding of relevant words and phrases, the precise meanings of which largely depend on how they're used in the passages in which they appear. By “relevant” we mean that the words and phrases you'll be tested on aren't the kinds you'd see only on a test such as the SAT. Instead, they're representative of the language used in college and careers, the kind of vocabulary that you'll use throughout your life — in high school, college, and beyond.

As people advance through school, their vocabulary expands. Some of this expansion comes in the form of new words and phrases important to particular courses. You might, for example, learn in a biology class that “gorse” is a European shrub or that a “philtrum” is that shallow little valley from the bottom of your nose to the top of your upper lip. Not all of your vocabulary growth will come in the form of specialized terms, however. More important is a growing understanding of words and phrases that are found in many kinds of course readings — from literature to history to science — that are key to unlocking the meaning of those texts. It's just this sort of vocabulary — words and phrases such as “channeled,” “intense,” and “departed from” — that's assessed on the redesigned SAT.

On the test, you may encounter words or phrases that are new to you. Don't worry. The passages containing those words and phrases will provide

REMEMBER

The redesigned SAT won't test you on the meaning of obscure, seldom-used words and phrases presented with little context. Rather, you'll be tested on contextually based words and phrases that often appear in college courses and beyond.

 **REMEMBER**

If you encounter words or phrases that you're not familiar with on the SAT, use the many context clues in the passage to help you develop a general sense of what the word or phrase means.

important clues to their meaning. In some cases, you may see familiar words and phrases used in ways that are different from how you might normally use them. Take the word “husband.” Most people think of a husband as a marriage partner, but “husband” can also be used as a verb that means to use carefully or in a limited way, as in “Salina asked her friend to husband the supplies so that they would not run out.” Here, too, context provides a critical clue to meaning even if you'd never heard of “husband” being used in this way. Note that “husband” in the “use carefully” sense might show up in practically any kind of text, making this word (and this meaning) valuable to know. It's just this sort of word that's become the focus of vocabulary-related questions on the redesigned SAT.

 **Command of Evidence**

“Showing command of evidence” is probably not how you describe what you do when you write a research paper, but it's a good description nonetheless. When you demonstrate such command, you gather the best evidence to support your thesis or hypothesis; you interpret that evidence, putting it into your own words or quoting selectively from sources; and you consider the kinds of questions and criticisms that your audience is likely to have. This sort of process is what all writers do when they compose texts of any sort. Even writing stories follows a similar method, as authors have to figure out what scenes, characters, and details to use to further their goal for the narrative.

 **REMEMBER**

Using evidence to craft an argument or defend your position is something you'll be asked to do repeatedly in college and career. That's why you'll be asked to demonstrate this skill on the SAT.

On the SAT, you'll be asked to consider these same kinds of issues as you read various passages. Which part of the passage provides the best textual evidence for a particular conclusion? Can the focus of a piece of writing be sharpened by getting rid of a detail that may be interesting but isn't particularly relevant? Has the writer accurately incorporated information from a graph into the text? These kinds of questions are key parts of what the College Board means by demonstrating command of evidence.

One common way that the SAT assesses your command of evidence on the Reading Test is by asking you to determine the best evidence for the answer to a previous question. After answering the first question in such a pair, you'll have to identify the part of the passage that provides the clearest support for the answer to the first question. Your options will usually come in the form of short quotations from the passage. While this sounds challenging — and it can be — it's a lot like what you'd normally do when a teacher asks you to explain your interpretation of a text. If you say, for example, that you thought two characters in a story strongly disliked each other, your teacher might well ask you to explain why you feel that way. To do that, you'd cite textual evidence, such as what a character says or the words the author uses to describe that character's attitude or actions. In this way, then, the SAT is really just asking you to do what you do all the time in your classes and to show that you've mastered a skill that is critical for success in your future postsecondary work.

Essay Analyzing a Source

In the redesigned SAT, the Essay — which is now optional — is quite different from many other essay tests, including the one that’s been on the SAT since 2005 and will be replaced after the January 2016 administration. While many tests ask you to take and defend a position on an issue, the Essay portion of the redesigned SAT takes a different approach. You’ll be presented with a passage and asked to explain how the author of that passage builds an argument to persuade an audience.

As you’re reading the passage, you’ll want to consider such things as how the author uses evidence (such as facts and examples) to support claims, reasoning to develop ideas and connect claims and evidence, and stylistic or persuasive elements (such as word choice or appeals to emotion) to add power to ideas. You may also find that the author uses other techniques in an attempt to persuade an audience; you’re encouraged to write about those as well. When you write your response, you’ll want to focus on those techniques that are the most important to making that passage persuasive. If the author doesn’t use a lot of facts and figures, for instance, you’ll want to talk about what the author does instead, such as attempt to appeal to the audience’s feelings of pity or sense of duty. It’s your choice what to focus on, but however you develop your essay, it should demonstrate that you understand how the author puts his or her text together.

To give this another name, you’ll be performing a rhetorical analysis of a passage, explaining how the passage “works” as a piece of writing. Rhetorical analysis is different from summary, where you simply restate in your own words what an author has written. Rhetorical analysis is also different from taking a position on an issue. While the author will argue a case, it’s not your job to explain whether you agree or disagree. (The test directions remind you of this.) Instead, you are to explain what the author is doing and why, and how the writerly techniques the author is using attempt to persuade the audience. Responses that just summarize the passage or that simply take one side on an issue won’t receive the best scores.

Speaking of scores, the Essay has three of them: Reading, Analysis, and Writing. Each score is on a 2 to 8 scale, and the scores aren’t combined together or blended with other scores on the SAT. Your Reading score tells you how well you did in showing that you understood the passage; you can show that understanding by doing such things as discussing the passage’s central ideas and important details and selectively quoting or paraphrasing from the passage. Your Analysis score reflects how effectively you explained how the author builds an argument to persuade an audience. Your Writing score describes how effective your essay was as a piece of writing in terms of such things as organization, word choice, grammar, usage, and mechanics. One great thing about getting three scores instead of one (as on the previous SAT Essay) is that this more clearly rewards you for what you’ve done well and identifies areas that might need work. If, for example, you get a high

REMEMBER

Your task on the redesigned SAT Essay is quite different from tasks directing many essays you’ve been asked to write before. Rather than developing your own persuasive argument, you’ll be asked to analyze how another author builds an argument to persuade an audience.

REMEMBER

Your response on the Essay should neither simply summarize the argument presented nor present your opinion on an issue. Rather, your response should focus primarily on analyzing the techniques the author uses to persuade an audience.

score in Reading and Writing but a low score in Analysis, you showed that you understood what you read and could write about it effectively but struggled with examining the passage rhetorically.

One other important feature of the redesigned Essay is that the task you'll be presented with is the same every time. You'll always be asked to consider how an author builds an argument to persuade an audience. That's it. Only the passage and a sentence in the prompt describing that passage change on each administration of the SAT. No more trying to guess what the College Board is going to ask this time around — which makes preparing for the test that much easier. Because the redesigned Essay includes a reading and requires careful analysis of that text, the time limit has gone up to 50 minutes (from the previous 25 minutes) to give you adequate time for your response.

Focus on Math that Matters Most

The SAT Math Test focuses on three areas where numbers help us to manage and understand the world. The questions in Problem Solving and Data Analysis are grounded in daily situations that many of us are familiar with. Percentages (who pays which portion of a meal at a restaurant), ratios (how much additional paint is needed if half a quart covered one wall of your bedroom), and proportional reasoning are all part of a repertoire of basic math strategies for solving problems in science, social studies, careers, and life.

For example, when a natural disaster occurs, professionals immediately begin gathering information — data — about the number of roads open, people stranded, helicopters available, supplies needed, emergency responders on call, and more. Analyzing the conditions that impact an area because of a natural calamity helps workers learn more and improves their capabilities in future disasters. Each person's story is important, but it's the numbers taken together that help relief agencies and government officials make the decisions that will help the most people as quickly as possible. (Perhaps it's occurred to you that this description offers a mathematical version of demonstrating command of evidence, as discussed previously. What we do with numbers and with words isn't as different as many people think.)

The second area in math covered on the SAT is Heart of Algebra. As you might guess, the goal is mastery of linear equations and systems. This mastery is part of developing your skill in thinking abstractly. You've been building this capacity since infancy as you worked with symbols. A smile is a well-known symbol, as is a nod. You learned to read, and your skills with abstract symbols grew by leaps and bounds. Take the word “chair.” It's composed of curves, straight lines, and a dot. It stands for a physical chair, but it's a constructed abstract representation. If you have a friend or relative who knows another form of writing besides the English alphabet, ask him or her to write “chair” and see how the two representations compare. As you know, math, like language, relies on symbols to create relationships.

REMEMBER

The redesigned SAT Math Test focuses on fewer topics that research has shown matter most for college and career readiness and success.

REMEMBER

The Math Test emphasizes the application of essential math skills to real-world situations and problems.

Becoming skilled in linear equations and systems gives you practice in thinking abstractly — how things relate or don't relate. Such abstract thinking as is routinely called on when solving problems in algebra is another important element of becoming prepared to succeed in college and career.

The final area covered on the SAT is Passport to Advanced Math. Questions of this sort will test your skill in managing more complex equations.

Although there are only three subscore areas in the Math Test (Problem Solving and Data Analysis, Heart of Algebra, and Passport to Advanced Math), there are actually four areas covered in total. Geometry and trigonometry are addressed under the heading of Additional Topics in Math.

Problems Grounded in Real-World Contexts

Throughout the redesigned SAT, you'll engage with questions grounded in the real world, questions directly related to the work performed in college and career.

In the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing section, the Reading Test will include literature and literary nonfiction, but also feature readings and graphics like ones you're likely to encounter in science and social science courses and in various majors and careers. On the Writing and Language Test, you'll be asked to do more than identify errors; you'll revise and edit to improve texts on career-related topics and in the subject areas of history/social studies, the humanities, and science.

Included on the Math Test are a number of questions situated in science, social science, career, and other real-world scenarios. Some of these questions are discrete, meaning that they're independent of the other questions on the test, while others will be grouped in small sets, with each set's questions based in a common context. Some real-world questions are application problems that require you to perform multiple steps to reach the correct solution — problems that ask you to dig in, think through and carry out a sequence of tasks, and model a situation mathematically.



REMEMBER

You'll be asked to analyze and interpret informational graphics such as tables, graphs, and charts on the SAT, as these skills are essential in college, career, and everyday life.

Analysis in History/Social Studies and in Science

The SAT has always included a range of different passages and questions, but the redesigned SAT has a sharper and more consistent focus on two important areas of study: history/social studies and science. Although you may not always notice them because they're not marked as such, questions on history/social studies and science topics can be found throughout the Reading, Writing and Language, and Math Tests of the redesigned SAT.

 **REMEMBER**

While you won't be tested on history/social studies or science facts on the SAT, you will be asked to apply skills you should have learned in these classes, like identifying a researcher's conclusion.

It's important to note that these questions don't ask you to provide history/social studies or science facts, such as the year the Battle of Hastings was fought or the chemical formula for a particular molecule. Instead, these questions ask you to apply the knowledge and skills that you should have picked up in your history, social studies, and science courses to problems in reading, writing, language, and math. On the Reading Test, for example, you'll be given two history/social studies and two science passages to analyze. You might be asked to identify the conclusion a researcher drew or the evidence used to support that conclusion. On the Writing and Language Test, you could be asked to revise a passage to incorporate data from a table into the writer's description of the results of an experiment. On the Math Test, some questions will ask you to solve problems grounded in social studies or science contexts. Your scores in Analysis in History/Social Studies and in Analysis in Science, which are drawn from questions on all three of those tests, will help you see how well you're doing in these areas and whether you need additional practice.

 **U.S. Founding Documents and the Great Global Conversation**

The founding documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Federalist Papers, continue to influence discussions and debates about the nature of civic life and of individual and collective rights and responsibilities. We see this not only in the speeches of politicians and the decisions of members of the judiciary but also in literature and popular culture. The ideas articulated centuries ago by the U.S. founders have, over time, mingled with and been enriched by those of more recent authors from the United States and across the globe. The writings of people such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Edmund Burke have both broadened and deepened the conversation around the central question of how we are all to live together.

These founding documents and texts in the Great Global Conversation often do present some challenges for the reader. The vocabulary is often elevated, the sentences can be long and involved, and the ideas discussed are often more abstract than we're used to dealing with on a daily basis. The rewards of a close reading of these texts, though, are significant, as we exercise the privilege of engaging with some of the most important and influential works ever written.

The SAT Reading Test includes a passage from either a U.S. founding document or a text in the Great Global Conversation. The questions will ask you to think about such things as the author's main points, word choice, and persuasive techniques. Although your appreciation for the text may be increased if you've read it before, the questions don't assume that you have.

Everything you need to know to answer the questions can be found in the passage itself or in supplementary material, such as an explanatory note.

😊 **No Penalty for Wrong Answers**

In the past, the SAT gave a point for each correct answer and took away a quarter of a point for each incorrect answer to a multiple-choice question. The decision to eliminate the penalty for wrong answers was made to encourage you to try your best on all questions, even ones you're not sure of the answer to, without the added pressure of having to decide whether it would be best to take the risk and possibly lose a fraction of a point for an incorrect answer.

REMEMBER

Since there's no penalty for wrong answers, you should answer every question on the SAT. Never leave a question blank!